Routine, Disciplined, and Results-Oriented: Joint Plans and Operations (JPOx) and Decisionmaking Processes in U.S. Forces-Iraq (USF-I)

January 31, 2013 | Colonel Matthew Q. Dawson

Large organizations, whether military or civilian, require routine processes and active leadership to ensure that the amount of time and energy spent on internal oversight and management is minimized; strategies, plans, and operations are synchronized; decisionmaking is facilitated; and output or productivity is maximized. Optimal staffs and headquarters are well-led by a cooperative team of senior leaders and support staff, robust enough to have intelligent redundancy, well-resourced across all three planning horizons, are as cooperative and transparent with other staffs and headquarters as possible, and have a routine process and control mechanism that regulates the battle rhythm.

The staff and headquarters of U.S. Forces-Iraq (USF-I) was no exception, and this article focuses on the last of these five key points—the core routine Joint plans and operations (JPOx) process and control mechanisms in USF-I. The routine and effective USF-I core staff process served as a control mechanism inside a rational battle rhythm. It reduced the amount of time and energy spent on internal oversight; synchronized strategies, plans, and operations; facilitated decisionmaking; and maximized output. The process helped train and educate the staff, encouraged teamwork on a timeline that made sense, and improved the quality of all products, saving time in execution. This routine—easily repeatable—and results-oriented staff process regulated the staff and reduced the potential for harm (overwhelming or confusing subordinate units, for example). It was really a system of processes that had at its core the USF-I JPOx series of

events, and it naturally accounted for the battle rhythms of higher and lower headquarters, while encouraging routine parallel and collaborative planning with strategic and interagency leaders. The men and women of the USF-I staff and headquarters participated in, witnessed the impact of, and benefitted from an effective, flexible staff process that brought order and some measure of predictability to decisionmaking, while synchronizing military action in Iraq with the interagency under the lead of the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq.

The USF-I headquarters and staff was formed by the merger of the Multi-National Forces-Iraq (MNF-I), the Multi-National Security Transition Command–Iraq (MNSTC-I), and the Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I). This merger not only created USF-I, it set the conditions for how USF-I would function. The legacy processes and battle rhythms that were used by the three former organizations did not disappear overnight, neither did the organizational cultures of these formerly independent organizations change in an instant. Following the very deliberate and well thought out transition from three headquarters to one, there were inevitable refinements and compromises to account for conditions in the operating environment, the ebb and flow of priorities and focus, strengths and weaknesses of organizations and individuals, and learning.

By the fall of 2010, leaders at all levels of the USF-I and the U.S. Mission-Iraq (USM-I) were planning to redeploy all USF-I personnel, retrograde all USF-I equipment, and transition all enduring operations to the civilian-led interagency team that would continue to pursue U.S. national objectives in Iraq and the region. By January 2011, three major lines of effort emerged: Strengthen the Iraqi Security Forces; Conduct Transitions; and Reposture the Force. It was evident from the outset that there was tension in the execution of operations in Iraq, especially concerning the removal of all USF-I personnel and equipment while maintaining and demonstrating the continuity of the U.S. Government commitment to Iraq and regional partners. Tension was also felt in the confluence of regional and global events that continue to shape and influence Iraq. A confrontational Iran, the revolution unfolding in Egypt, the NATO-led intervention in Libya, sectarian tensions in Bahrain, turmoil in Yemen, upheaval in Syria, and the war in Afghanistan all had the potential to jeopardize the progress toward a sovereign, stable, and self-reliant Iraq. The tension, both internal and external to Iraq, meant that U.S. forces must remain capable, flexible, and engaged. To do this with minimal disruption and risk, the senior headquarters in Iraq required a deliberate process to support senior-level decisionmaking.

Like all military endeavors, the men and women in the arena today owe a debt of gratitude to those that came before—USF-I was no exception. The command built on the conditions set by

great teammates who came before to create an effective staff process that was routine, disciplined, and results-oriented. Responding to guidance from the Commanding General (CG), USF-I, the Chief of Staff directed a series of cross-cutting initiatives designed to optimize staff processes and streamline decisionmaking. The team created a process that helped the CG understand, visualize, and direct at the four-star level in a very short time.

The process referred to does not include the entirety of the battle rhythm events in USF-I. Battle rhythm events that are too numerous to mention fed the core USF-I decisionmaking process. There were Joint Planning Teams (JPTs) that formed and disbanded over time to frame issues, solve specific problems, develop plans, and develop orders. There were also Work Groups (WGs) that had specific, recurring requirements, many of which led to analysis and synthesis that demanded senior leader attention or fed the staff estimate process to inform planning efforts. In fact, there were dozens of battle rhythm events where the intent was to make the staff coordination, that was necessary to maintain forward progress across the command, a routine process. There was also what could be referred to as routine staff coordination, where staff officers fixed problems without the overhead of a B2C2WG—Boards, Bureaus, Centers, Cells, and Working Groups—construct. In short, the process being referred to was the USF-I Joint Plans and Operations process.

The USF-I JPOx process, as the core staff process was known, became the driver for all battle rhythm activity in USF-I (see Figure 1). The cycle lasted a week, starting Saturday and ending Friday. There were, of course, times when products had to go through the process, or parts of the process, more than once, but most actions passed through in a week. There were four meetings a week, held in the following order: Joint Plans and Operations Group (JPOG); Joint Plans and Operations Council (JPOC); Joint Plans and Operations Huddle (JPOH); and Joint Plans and Operations Board (JPOB). While there were, as stated, numerous B2C2WG events, three additional events must be included as part of the core USF-I process: the monthly Operational Synchronization Board (OSB); the bi-weekly Executive Sustainment Synchronization Board (ESSB); and the monthly Joint Assessment Board (JAB).

Figure 1: USF-I's Joint Plans and Operations Process
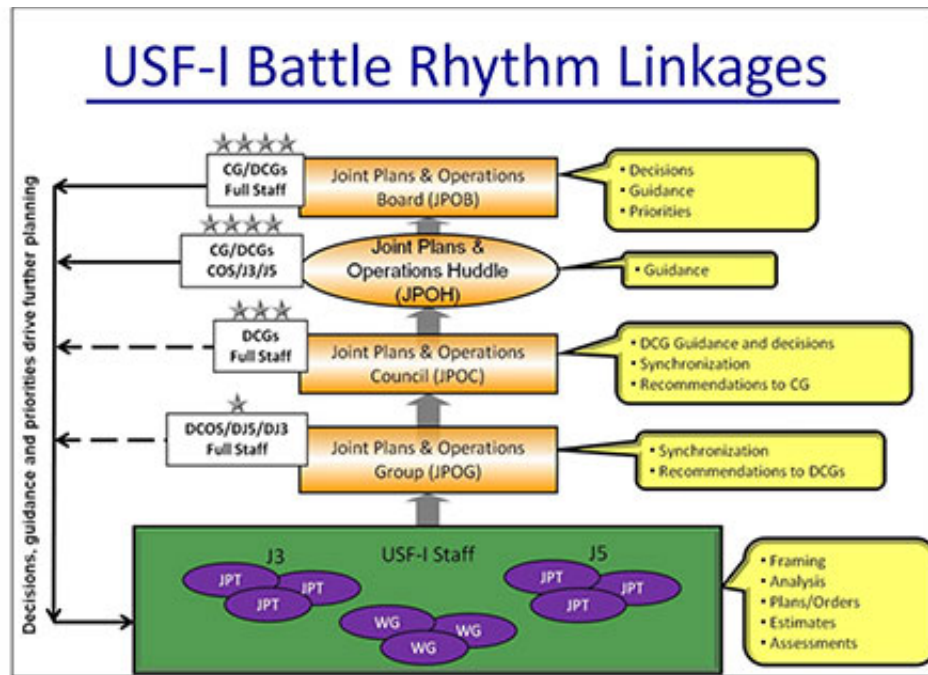
The execution of the JPOx process was fairly simple and standard across all four events, beginning with the JPOG. It would have been familiar to any military leader who had attended an information or decision briefing. All sessions began with introductory comments, followed by a review of the agenda. Following that, the information and decision briefings began, with the focus primarily on decision briefings. Following the discussions and decisions regarding the briefings, the team reviewed the planning priorities across all three planning horizons, to include Advise and Train/Office of Security Cooperation planning efforts. The session concluded with a discussion of the way ahead and, usually, an opportunity for comments and a review of the decisions made and actions directed. The typical products were planning priorities, products at varying stages in the Joint Operational Planning Process or similar decisionmaking process, assessments, and other material as directed/needed, as well as notes that were disseminated to the team following all sessions.

For each step in the JPOx process—JPOG through JPOB—attendees reviewed the products prior to the meeting, attended the briefings, offered refinement suggestions for risk mitigation and/or resource allocation, identified errors, recognized and reduced real or potential tension that had not been eliminated in staffing, and determined if the briefing/action was ready to go to the next step in the process, or, in the case of the JPOB, if it was ready for decision and execution. The key to success was the informed participation of leaders at increasing levels of seniority and experience as decision briefings moved through the weekly process. Not all suggestions were

accepted, some to the detriment of the office of primary responsibility for the action, but it was a good forum to raise situational awareness across the staff, identify areas for concern or further analysis, and fix problems.

The JPOG was held on Saturdays and was the Colonel/Captain-level forum for division chiefs and deputies. It was chaired by the Deputy Chief of Staff and, for a period of time, co-chaired by the Deputy J3 and Deputy J5. This is where briefings and products entered the decisionmaking process, following action in JPTs, WGs, staff coordination, and so on. The JPOG could be referred to as a "murder board," where field grade subject matter experts tested the ideas across all specialties and staff sections. The co-chairs would then determine what refinements were needed, what proposals were ready to go to the JPOC, and how to proceed with proposed planning priorities and actions. The J5 was the staff lead.

The JPOC was held on Mondays and was the Deputy Commanding General (DCG)-level forum for the DCGs, Chief of Staff, and staff primaries. It was co-chaired by the DCGs for Operations, Advise and Train, and Support. This is where briefings and products met the first step in decisionmaking. There were issues that came to this forum that fell within the terms of reference for attendees, meaning they could make the decisions needed to complete the action. However, for the most part, briefings that required a decision at this stage were bound for the CG's desk. At these meetings, there was still room for disagreement and opposing viewpoints leading to healthy and meaningful discussions. The DCG for Operations was the staff lead.

The JPOH was held on Wednesdays and was the CG-level forum for the DCGs, Chief of Staff, J3, and J5 (and others by invitation). It was chaired by the CG, and it is where briefings and products were introduced to the CG in their final draft form. This was also the first step in the CG's decisionmaking process, where the CG occasionally made the requested decisions without waiting for the Friday JPOB meeting. However, for the most part, briefings that required a decision at this stage were bound for the JPOB. Disagreement and opposing viewpoints were also encouraged in this small group huddle. The discussions often led to new proposals, refinements, and/or new timelines for decision or execution. The Assistant Chief of Staff (ACOS) was the staff lead.

This was not the only huddle, however; the process was purposely designed to be flexible. For complex problems, there were dozens of small group huddles with the CG, which were intended to solicit guidance and support his understanding and visualization. These planning huddles were instrumental in getting products to the point where they could enter the JPOx process, whether as

a whole or in pieces, that enabled forward progress prior to the formal release of an order. There were also huddles that focused on crisis action, compartmented planning, or short suspense requirements where timelines, contributors, and staffing were purposely limited for a variety of reasons. This flexibility was essential, ensuring that the headquarters did not adhere to the process without consideration for the realities of operations in a Joint operating area that was in daily contact with the interagency, host nation interagency, and a range of evolving adversaries. The process was also adapted over time to ensure it was responsive to the needs of decisionmakers and more effective for the staff.

The JPOB was held on Fridays and was the CG-level forum for the DCGs, Chief of Staff, and staff/subordinate primaries. It was chaired by the CG, and it is where briefings and products were brought for decision. This was the last step in the official JPOx process, not counting the events that directed action and assessed performance. Seldom did briefings reach this point and not get approved, but there were modifications that occurred between Wednesday and Friday and even challenges or comments that led to changes on Friday. Disagreement and opposing viewpoints were still encouraged, but it was unusual for attendees to challenge a product at this late stage. In fact, this process also served as a "warning order" to the staff and subordinates, facilitating movement. Following the JPOB, decisions were codified in operations orders or fragmentary orders and disseminated for execution. The ACOS was the staff lead.

In addition to this core process, there were essential battle rhythm events that prepared for JPOx sessions or implemented decisions of the JPOx process (or both), as well as interagency processes to ensure the team in Iraq was synchronized. A few of the key events are discussed below to provide insight into the broader execution of leadership and decisionmaking across the staff and to ensure that the JPOx process is seen in context.

The OSB was the monthly CG-level forum for the DCGs, Chief of Staff, and staff/subordinate primaries. It was chaired by the CG, and is where the team got together and looked out 90 days across all joint functions and commands to ensure that the plan was being refined and synchronized in execution. The OSB was an elaborate review of each division's operating environment and the major activities occurring across the joint operations area. The conference room was structured much like a senior level combined arms rehearsal, with multiple screen presentations like that of the Command Post of the Future providing the common operating picture, detailed informational slides that showed facts and trends, and scripted presentations representing all interested parties in Iraq, including the U.S. Mission-Iraq team. Highlights of the

presentations included decision points, limitations, implications, and risk mitigation strategies to integrate maneuver, sustainment, and transition activities across Iraq. The expected outcome was a common operating picture, situational awareness, an understanding of the interdependence of the many plans being executed simultaneously at all levels, assignment of responsibility to mitigate risk, and the resolution of friction with a fragmentary order that accounted for changes resulting for the OSB. The real benefit of the OSB was not the presentation itself, but the coordination and refinement that went into the event and the refinements made following the presentation. The J3 was the staff lead.

The ESSB was the bi-weekly DCG-level forum, meeting every other Saturday, attended by the DCG-Support, Deputy Chief of Staff, and staff/subordinate support primaries. It was chaired by the DCG-Support and, in coordination with major subordinate commands and support organizations outside USF-I. This team synchronized sustainment activities, established priorities, directed action to fill shortages or requirements, anticipated the actions required to address emerging requirements, determined transition activity concepts, developed recommendations for the CG, and ensured that the sustainment team was fully supporting planning efforts and the execution of orders across the interagency with concepts of support that were feasible and efficient. This board made decisions that addressed both sides of the problem statements—feeding planning efforts as well as refining the execution of orders that were in progress. The execution of this forum was similar to typical coordination and decisionmaking meetings. There were also forums that specifically addressed enduring requirements—requirements for basing and sustainment that were needed by the USM-I and the Office of Security Cooperation-Iraq (OSC-I) post-2011. The J4 was the staff lead.

Finally, the JAB was held on the first Tuesday of every month, chaired by the CG and attended by all DCGs, the Chief of Staff, and staff/subordinate primaries. The purpose of the board was to present the staffed assessment of key transition operations orders.   This process ended in November 2011 with the final assessment transtion planning. Each line of effort in the operational framework contained objectives that defined the line. Each objective was evaluated by measureable effects, allowing a holistic assessment at multiple levels within the construct. Line of effort objective owners would present their assessments, taking the briefings through the JPOx process until the board level. Rather than take the assessment to the JPOB, it went to the JAB to allow sufficient time and focus on the progress of the "campaign plan." The intent was to provide the CG with current assessments, but more importantly, provide recommendations for resource allocation to improve performance, develop operational refinements, and generate taskings. The

J5 was the staff lead.

It was common, but not mandatory, for material that had gone through the JPOx process to then enter the interagency process: the weekly Executive Core Group (ECG), the weekly Core, and the quarterly Senior Leader Forum (SLF). The ECG was co-chaired by the Deputy Chief of Mission and the USF-I Chief of Staff, while the Core and SLF were co-chaired by the CG and the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq. This series of meetings was primarily intended to integrate and synchronize the execution of the USM-I and USF-I Joint Campaign Plan in order to achieve the aspirational goals of the USM-I and USF-I Joint Vision. The equivalent of the JPOG in the interagency process was not needed because interagency planners were invited to attend the JPTs and participate in the processes, to include the JPOx process—that accounted for a large majority of the material that entered the ECG-Core-SLF process. It is important to note that the interagency is not resourced with the robust planning teams that can be found in the various staff organizations of a typical four-star headquarters/staff, so the burden for coordination and outreach should rest on the military staff. Of note, the Ambassador and his primaries were also invited to USF-I events, like the OSB, in order to increase transparency and advance the U.S. Government's interests in Iraq and the region. The J5 was the staff lead.

Of course, these processes were enabled by robust and accessible knowledge management and information technology support activities. The battle rhythm and all briefings were maintained on the USF-I portal. There were simple and intuitive calendars, work areas for staff coordination, controls to prevent unauthorized manipulation, archiving capabilities, and a search engine. The control of information, especially the ability to make it easy to find and manipulate, is an absolutely critical enabling function. The USF-I network, even in the midst of dividing and moving the headquarters, was more than sufficient at all times. The communications and knowledge management teams made the support of these bandwidth-intensive activities look easy.

Like all large organizations, the USF-I was not perfect. However, the steady drumbeat of progress that sounded at the core of the USF-I battle rhythm—the JPOx process—was supported by a disciplined, routine processes, and active leaders across the command, all of which enabled the successful conclusion of U.S. military operations in Iraq. It was the engine that drove everything of direct interest to the Commanding General, USF-I. Despite the uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding the end of the war in Iraq, or any war, leaders effectively used the JPOx process to collectively move the team forward, refining assumptions and mitigating risk. It is important to note that the "personality factor" plays a key role at all levels of command, but the

facts remain: a good staff process reduces tension, provides an outlet for creativity, and improves the quality of proposals, while harnessing strong personalities for the benefit of the mission. The USF-I team was blessed by a cooperative team of senior leaders and support staff who created, challenged, embraced, and refined the JPOx process to deliver world-class results in the execution of multiple, sometimes competing, missions. The amount of time and energy spent on internal oversight and management was minimized; strategies, plans, and operations were synchronized; decisionmaking was facilitated; and productivity was maximized, resulting in the successful end of U.S. military operations in Iraq in a responsible and honorable manner.

*****

The views expressed in this Of Interest piece are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government. This piece is cleared for public release; distribution is unlimited.

*****

Organizations interested in reprinting this or other SSI and USAWC Press pieces should contact the Editor for Production via e-mail at *SSI_Publishing@conus.army.mil*. All organizations granted this right must include the following statement: "Reprinted with permission of the Strategic Studies Institute and USAWC Press, U.S. Army War College."